

“That’s Folks Singin’”: An Introduction to Black American Folk Songs

by Jester Hairston

Spirituals and gospel music are a unique product of black American culture. Their influence on both sacred and secular music in the United States is well-recognized but few academic studies of this music have been done.

On January 30, a day-long symposium entitled “Evolution of Black Religious Music: History, Functions & Social Influence” was held at the California Afro-American Museum of History and Culture in Los Angeles. The purpose of the symposium, which was sponsored by The Young Saints Scholarship Foundation and funded by CCH, was to bring to the public an awareness of black religious music’s historical value, its impact on family and community life and its social function in contemporary society. In addition to various panels and discussions, the symposium included demonstrations of the various styles and concepts of black religious music by community singing groups.

The keynote address for the symposium was given by Dr. Jester Hairston, well-known arranger, composer, traveling choir leader and storyteller. Dr. Hairston has been spreading his brand of good will through music all over the world for over a half a century. He holds honorary Doctor of Music and Fine Arts degrees from the University of the Pacific, Stockton; Tufts University, Boston; University of Massachusetts, Amherst; and Lutheran College, Decorah, Iowa. As an actor, Hairston played the role of “Leroy” (the King Fish’s brother-in-law) in the “Amos ‘n’ Andy” radio and TV shows and has appeared in several films including “In the Heat of the Night” and “Lady Sings the Blues.” He is currently featured on the “Amen” TV show.

The following excerpt of his remarks conveys the content of his address but cannot do justice to the vitality of his musical presentation.

I am honored to have a part in this wonderful program. This is what I came up doing, programs on the beginning of our music. I didn’t major in spirituals. I grew into them by accident. I call the music I am discussing with you all, Negro-Colored-Black-Afro-American folk song. If somebody else has a name they think of, you give it to me and I will use it in the next concert. As a separate race of people in this big country of Americans, we have not yet decided what we want to be called. When I came up in 1901, we were all Negroes. Then, I don’t know exactly what year, we became colored. Now we are black.

The music I am talking about and have built my life around is the music of the slaves. I have talked with so many older people who do not know the difference between the gospel songs of today and what we call Negro or black American folk songs. The gospel songs and the



Dr. Jester Hairston was a featured speaker at the “Evolution of Black Religious Music” symposium.

gospel choirs that you hear so much about grew up after 1865. Before 1865, the songs that your great-great-grandmothers and grandfathers and my grandmother sang were what we call the spirituals of the black Americans. They are the spirituals. Another differentiation is that those songs are in what we call the public domain. Any of you who think you can write music, or can and want to sell it, can make an arrangement of “Go Down Moses,” “Steal Away to Jesus” or “Git on Board.” You can arrange any of those songs and if you get a publisher to sell them, you can get the money for them. Nobody will bother you. But if you arrange “Precious Lord Take My Hand” and have somebody sing it over the air, you are in trouble. You are going to be sued because that is a written song, written on inspiration. But for money. Practically all of my songs are based on the spirituals of my grandmothers and grandfathers, and they have lasted a long, long time. I just had a call from my publisher and he said he sold 150 copies of one of the oldest songs that I wrote—over fifty years ago. It is still around. A lot of these gospel songs you hear today won’t be here fifty years from now because the style changes so fast. There’s nothing wrong with the song, but the style changes.

I want to talk about a couple of these songs to show you how they emerged and how clever those people we call slaves were. They had no education, and there were

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rules preventing anyone from giving them any music education or classical education. But they came from Africa with God in their hearts and music in their hearts, and they formed the basis for the songs we hear now so many days in church. I heard a gospel program the other day, a Martin Luther King Program. Beautiful but only one spiritual. They did “Before I’d Be a Slave, I’d Be Buried in my Grave,” but everything else was modern gospel. I don’t resent that, but I feel very sorry that they obscured all of these songs of our ancestors. And some of them are beautiful, beautiful songs that will be here when all of us are dead and gone.

In the early days, they created songs about the things that were happening around the plantation. For instance, they had laws preventing anybody from teaching these people how to read or write. You would be put in jail or run out of town if you were caught teaching slaves to read or write. But many Quakers did sneak around and teach people a little bit. What the slaves who were taught by missionaries learned is “You behave yourself and you go to heaven. If you don’t behave yourself, you go to hell.” That was our first idea of Christianity. You go to heaven if you do anything that any white person tells you to do. But black people did not understand. These white people were going to church every Sunday while they either had to work on Sunday at the plantation or else they couldn’t do anything but sit in the cabin. They couldn’t go to the churches. They wondered what kind of religion this was. For the least little thing some slaves were beaten half to death on Sunday. This was what we had to contend with as slaves. So we created a group of songs I call “telegraph songs.” We had ways of communicating with each other what we felt.

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One of the oldest and best of the telegraph songs was “Git On Board, Lil’ Children” or, since very few of us say “children,” “Git on Board, Lil’ Chil’un.” The reason they did not say “children” was not ignorance. It was because they came from Africa, and God made every African language rhythmically. Their whole language is based on rhythm. When they came over here, so many of the words, English words especially, were difficult for them. So instead of trying to get these difficult words, they fit them into the rhythm. If they had a “two” rhythm, the words had to fit into a “two” rhythm. If that meant that only one third of the word would fit that rhythm, that is all they used of it.

He never compromised his rhythm in any song that I have been able to find. That is how strong rhythm was to the Africans. He corrected the word into his rhythm. The same thing takes place in Chinese folk songs, Greek folk songs, Italian folk songs. They didn’t let the English language mess up their folk songs. So why should we?

I told you this song is a telegraph song. The slaves had been told a whole lot of things by their masters and

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the missionaries that they didn't understand. They wanted to complain about it, but they could not go to the master and try to reason with him. They would have been beaten half to death. So, he puts his resentment in songs and tells them to each other. Now the chorus is this:

Git on board, lil' chil'un
Git on board, lil' chil'un
Git on board, lil' chil'un

There's room for many a more

Maybe he is sweeping just in front of the cabin. His master and mistress are sitting around there and he is sweeping all around and he is singing. It is a rhythmic song, and some of the people nod and sing it too. "Why, isn't that a cute little song." What he is doing is anesthetizing these white people. Sing two or three choruses to get them anesthetized and then get his message in there. By that time they are all asleep, and that is what he wants. He couldn't get his message across by standing in the street talking, but he can do it by singing and smiling.

The first verse is to throw them off base, to tell them the story about his song:

The gospel train is a comin'
I hear it just at hand
I hear them cart wheels rumblin'
And movin' through the land

It goes on for three or four verses and by that time the white people are all anesthetized. "Listen to them! We didn't know they had beautiful voices like that." Now he wants to get in his message. He's talking about religion, about going to heaven on a train.

Da fare is cheap and all can go
The rich and poor are there
No second class on board this train
No difference in the fare

If he had stood on the corner in Richmond, Virginia and talked about there is no difference in the fare, you are going to the same heaven as white people, he would have been lynched. But he could do it by singing and grinning. I have sung this song in religious concerts all through the South, and white folks sing it louder than we do. Not thinking.

Another song. Now I'm going way back to the early days of our coming here. We didn't speak the language. We came here speaking various dialects. We didn't even understand each other. Think about that, ladies and gentlemen. All over Africa there are so many different tribes fighting with each other for thousands of years, just the same as white people in Europe have been fighting with each other for thousands of years. Then the white man comes over and captures us with his guns, throws us in the ship, brings us over here and sells us on the auction block. A man has five slaves on his plantation and every one of them came from a different tribe. They can't even speak to each other. The overseer says, "I want you boys to move this bale over here." They don't know what he is saying. They look at each other wondering what he is talking about.

This song "Shepherd" goes way back before my grandmother's age. It's a Christmas song. I'm going to put a descant in there for you to show you how that went in the old churches.

Shepherd, Shepherd, where'd you

lead your lambs

Did you hear that third? That's what we brought from Africa, and that's what makes American music beautiful, that low flat third. We couldn't sing it and we made it flat. It is not supposed to be flat. That is our note; that is your blue note.

Now I'll show you how the old folks in the Baptist church in a little town outside of Pittsburgh used to sing this and similar songs when I was six or seven years old.

Shepherd (I say) Shepherd, (tell me) where'd you

lead (where'd you lead) your lambs

Shepherd (I say) Shepherd, where'd you lead your lambs (where did you lead those lambs)

Shepherd (I say) Shepherd, (tell me) where'd you lead your lambs

Oh, de lambs done gone astray

(Oh yes) de lambs done gone astray

That is folks singing. You see, we couldn't read or write, but we could put that in there. That is the basis for the gospel song today.

This next one is an Easter song. We had been here a long time when we created this song. This is not first-generation slaves. The first-generation slaves could not speak English, and this song is practically all in Eng-

lish. It took a whole generation to learn just a few words of English. Think about it. When they first came here, they couldn't speak any language but their own. Then they began to hear words from the master and overseer. But the overseer was an indentured servant, which means a second class slave. He didn't go to school; he didn't have a third grade education. But it was the overseer who taught you your language. So you got two strikes against you to begin with. So these songs didn't come up the first day we got over here. It was probably not until the third generation that we began to actually create something that was worthwhile.

"We came here speaking various dialects. We didn't even understand each other. It took a whole generation to learn just a few words of English."

By this time many of the slaves had been converted. We couldn't beat them, so we joined them. We went to their churches and began to listen to what they were saying. It happened one word at a time. I have a whole group of songs with one English word, two English words. And after they got more educated, three. But it took years.

"Angels Roll'd the Stone Away" is more like gospel. I imagine it was created not far from 1865 because they knew English. The basis of what is gospel music today is in this song.

Oh, de angels roll'd the stone away

De angels roll'd the stone away

Was on that Easter Sunday morning

That de angels roll'd the stone away

Now just one thing I want to put in there. If you say this in good English, it would slow the rhythm of the song down. We don't say "the angels"; we say "de angels." This is the rhythm of the song. I am trying to give you ladies and gentlemen who are so adamantly against dialect, the reasons they used dialect. It was to fit their rhythms. This is a fast song. It is an African song. You can't say "the angels" and you can't put any "r" in morning. How do you say "good morning"? (Audience responds) That's right.



Jim Quay presents Constance Carroll with a momento of her term as CCH chair.



"Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound"



Sister Magdalen Coughlin, outgoing vice-chair, receives a tribute for her contributions to CCH.



Mary Curtin, CCH alumna, leaves the Council with words of wisdom from William Butler Yeats.



Each year CCH members gather for a retreat to review the past year's activities and to plan new CCH program initiatives. This event is also the occasion to honor outgoing CCH members, welcome new members, and install new officers. This year's outgoing members included Constance Carroll, Sister Magdalen Coughlin, Mary Curtin, and Ric Quinones, all of whom received tokens of appreciation for their service from their colleagues. New officers are Morton Rothstein, chair; Marc Mancini, vice-chair; Kathryn Gaedert, treasurer.

CCH members and staff bid fond farewells to the retiring members. Their contributions to the Council are greatly appreciated.

Outgoing CCH member, Ric Quinones, receives an alumnus t-shirt from executive director, Jim Quay.

CALENDAR OF HUMANITIES EVENTS

Exhibits

through September 30

“Oakland’s Firsts’ Black Pioneers and Institutions,” a photo exhibit opening on April 1 at East Bay Historical Society, 5606 San Pablo Ave., Oakland, T-Fri: 12:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. 415/658-3158

through May 15

“Stories from China’s Past: Han Dynasty Pictorial Tomb Tiles from Sichuan, People’s Republic of China” opens April 5 at Frederick S. Wight Gallery, UCLA. Museum hours are Tues: 11-8; Wed-Fri: 11-5; Sat & Sun: 1-5. 213/825-9345

through June 14

“Sojourners and Settlers: The Yemeni Immigrant Experience” opens on May 1 at UCLA’s Museum of Cultural History, Room 2, Haines Hall, Wed-Sun: noon-5 p.m. Closed Monday and Tuesday. Admission is free. 213/825-4361

through May 21

“Koreatown: A Photo History” opens May 2 at University of Southern California’s Doheny Library, Union Park Campus, Los Angeles. M-Th: 8 a.m.-12 midnight; Fri: 8 a.m.-5 p.m.; Sat: 9 a.m.-5 p.m.; Sun: 11 a.m.-12 midnight. 213/743-6050

through July 31

“The Chinese in the Monterey Bay Region Exhibit” opens May 13 at Fresno Metropolitan Museum, 1515 Van Ness Ave., Fresno. 209/441-1444

through March 1989

“Black Angelinos: The Afro-American in Los Angeles, 1850-1950,” opens on May 15 and will chronicle the diverse and complex experience of blacks in the Los Angeles area from 1850-1950. The exhibition will explore the lure of the California Dream and the impact of subsequent migrations of Afro-Americans to L.A. in the 1880s, the pre-World War I era and the 1940s, on the white and black residents in the city and on the migrants themselves, while examining how the trials of black resettlement in Southern California differed from comparable movements to other urban centers. The exhibit is at the California Afro-American Museum, 600 State Dr., Exposition Park, Los Angeles. For more information, please contact Mr. Lonnie Bunch at 213/744-7432.

Events

April 21

“Fulfilling the Promise: Considering the Bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution,” an exhibit and a half-day symposium on discrimination and racism in California’s educational system that will feature Equal Rights Advocate attorney, Ms. Shauna Marshall, at the College Center of Sacramento City College, 1 p.m.-5 p.m. For more information, please call Elaine Elinson at 415/621-2493.

April 29

“Pre-Concert Discussion Series on Women Composers, Pt. 2” presents “A Birthday Bash,” a concert featuring composer Vivian Fine in honor of her 75th birthday, at First Congregational Church, Dana & Durant Streets, Berkeley, 8 p.m. “Concert Conversations” are held at 7:15. For further details, please contact Ms. Miriam Abrams at 415/626-4888.

May

“Fulfilling the Promise: Considering the Bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution,” an exhibit and symposium in Fresno focusing on “Labor Organizations and First Amendment Rights.” For location, date and time, please call Ms. Elaine Elinson at 415/621-2493.

May

“Black Angelinos: The Afro-American in Los Angeles, 1850-1950,” a panel discussion and slide presentation will be presented by Mr. Lonnie Bunch at Riverside Municipal Museum, 3720 Orange St., Riverside. For more detailed information, please call 714/782-5273 or Mr. Lonnie Bunch at 213/744-7432.

May 8

“Taper Playviews,” a pre- and post-play discussion of “The Colored Museum” at Mark Taper Forum, Los Angeles Music Center, 135 N. Grand Ave., 6:30 p.m. Dr. Sandra Mitchell-Kernan, UCLA Center for Afro-American Studies, will lead the discussion. 213/972-7353

May 9

“Upon First Impressions” will chronicle the stories of real people and places of Los Angeles over the past two centuries and will air on KCET, Los Angeles, May 9 at 7:30 p.m. This program will be repeated on May 14, 2:30 p.m., and May 15, 11:30 p.m. For more information, please call Margaret Bach at 213/667-9376.

May 12

“E Pluribus Unum: Does Mr. Madison’s Constitution Require Mr. Madison’s Avenue?” final debate sponsored by Glendale College, 7 p.m.-9:30 p.m. at Glendale Community College Campus Center. 818/240-1000 or 818/846-0612

May 13

Maxine Hong Kingston reads from her latest work, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*, at the Fresno Hilton. For more information, call the CCH office 415/391-1474

May 14

Public Humanities Conference in Fresno. Discussions, lecture, film screening and other events related to the theme of “Immigration in the Central Valley.” See articles in this issue of *Network* for details of these events.

May 18

“Taper Playviews,” a pre- and post-play discussion of “The Colored Museum” at Mark Taper Forum, Los Angeles Music Center, 135 N. Grand Ave., 7 p.m. Dr. Robert Grant, USC, will lead the discussion focusing on “A Historical Perspective on Afro-American Theatre.” 213/972-7353

May 19-21

“Sojourners and Settlers,” an international Conference on issues pertaining to labor migration will be sponsored by the von Grunebaum Center, UCLA International Studies and Overseas Programs and the UCLA Institute for Social Science Research at UCLA. Admission is free. For more detailed information, please call 213/825-4361

June 26-27

“A Conference on the Interpretation of Gregorian Chant” will be held at California State University, Music Building, Room 124, Los Angeles. For more detailed information, please contact Mr. Robert Fowells or Ms. Kathy Nixon at 213/224-3448

July 13

“Taper Playviews,” a pre- and post-play discussion of “Lost Highway” at Mark Taper Forum, Los Angeles Music Center, 135 N. Grand Ave., 7 p.m. Dr. D.K. Wilgus, UCLA, Dept. of Folklore, will lead the discussion. 213/972-7353

July 17

“Taper Playviews,” a pre- and post-play discussion of “Lost Highway” at Mark Taper Forum, Los Angeles Music Center, 135 N. Grand Ave., 6:30 p.m. Dr. Willi Smythe, State Folklorist of Oklahoma, will speak on “Nashville, Country Music and Radio as a Medium for Rural Peoples.” 213/972-7353

Maxine Hong Kingston Introduces “Tripmaster Monkey” to Fresno Audiences

In her books, the award-winning author, Maxine Hong Kingston, combines the art of storytelling and the craft of writing. The Chinese “talk story” was a strong influence on her own life and provided the material for two of her earlier books: *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976); and its companion volume *China Men* (1980). These books combine myths, memories, facts, and stories. They are “talk story” books, part gossip and part tradition from tales imported from China.

According to Kingston, a native of Stockton, the beauty of the “talk story” is that it never remains the same. It changes every time it is told depending on the experience of the storyteller and the needs of the listener. Her current work in progress, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*, is a true “talk story” book. Plot and character are presented in a fluid pattern as if the story could be told and re-told by different people in different ways. The term “fake book” suggests there could be many different plots for the same story.

In an essay entitled “Through the Black Curtain” that she wrote for the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley, Kingston speaks of the evolution of an idea that came to her when she was very young—the idea that black curtains hang over something wonderful, some amazing show about to open.

“In the book I am working on now, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*, I am trying to understand that the black curtains are literally curtains—stage curtains. I remember the shows to raise money for China Relief. And parades with a red flag, street-wide for the bystanders to throw money into. And operas, live and on film. And American films on Saturday afternoons and Hong Kong films on Sundays. Talk stories and letters that came from China were often about what happened at



Maxine Hong Kingston will read from her latest work, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*, in Fresno on May 13.

the theater, how the theater became Communist, how theaters went dark. The first time I crossed the border from Hong Kong into a village in China, I saw that the only large building was the theater, which had the face of a monkey-clown on the wall. On my second, longer trip, I visited my parents’ villages; the biggest building in my father’s village is the Hong family temple, which was changed into a barn during the Cultural Revolution. The only large structure in my mother’s village is the music hall. So that is where my son’s and my nieces’ and nephews’ love of music comes from, and why they want to go into show business.

“As I write further into *Tripmaster Monkey*, I learn a new view of human nature and why we migrate—we didn’t go looking for the Gold Mountain in order to plunder it, nor to find something more to eat. I had thought after writing *China Men* that curiosity and adventure were high-minded enough purposes. But out-on-the-road and off-the-boat we made theater. The songs and myths and dances changed to fit circumstances in the new world. America is our country not just for work but for play.

“In *Tripmaster*, the curtains are made of water, the waterfalls behind which the King of the Monkeys leads his people. They find a land where they cavort and parade and tell jokes. The Monkey King has 72 transformations, and, of course, he changes into an American, a Californian, a North Beach-Chinatown cat. He does stand-up comedy and stand-up tragedy.

“The protagonist in *Tripmaster*, which is set in the 1960s in North Beach, Chinatown, Oakland, Sacramento, and Reno, is 23-year-old Wittman Ah Sing, who is working to bring theater back to life. He imagines its beginnings in mythic China, but all the while is alarmed that his roots are too exotic and non-American. I mean for Wittman to have a slangy, hip style. I hope that you hear a voice that is very different from the ones I’ve used before.”

Writing a “Talk Story”

Maxine Hong Kingston describes her writing process as an emotional task that becomes an intellectual one as the process progresses. “When I first set something down, I feel the emotions I write about. But when I do second draft, third draft, ninth draft, then I don’t feel very emotional. The rewriting is very intellectual; all my education and reading and intellect are involved. The mechanics of sentences, how one phrase or word goes with another one—all that happens in later drafts. There’s a very emotional first draft and a very technical last draft.

“What I have at the beginning of a book is not an outline. I have no idea of how stories will end or where the beginning will lead. Sometimes I draw pictures. I draw a blob and then I have a little arrow and it goes to this other blob, if you want to call that an outline. It’s hardly even words; it’s like a doodle. Then when it turns into words, I find the words lead me to various scenes and stories which I don’t know about until I get there. I don’t see the order until very late in the writing and sometimes the ending just comes. I just run up against it. All of a sudden the book’s over and I didn’t know it would be over. I could wake up in the morning and not know that that was the day the story was going to end. So it’s a surprise for me too....”

The California Council for the Humanities invites you to join us in welcoming Maxine Hong Kingston to the Fresno area on Friday evening, May 13, at 8 p.m. at the Fresno Hilton where she will read from her new book, *Tripmaster Monkey*. A public reception will follow the reading.

Schedule of Fresno Events

- May 13 8 p.m. Maxine Hong Kingston reads from her latest work, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* at The Fresno Hilton, 1055 Van Ness Avenue
Public Reception follows the reading
- May 14 9 a.m. Roundtable discussion of immigration in the Central Valley sponsored by California Tomorrow. Participants include:
Charles Wollenberg, Historian
Tony Vang, Lao Family
Tam Nguyen, Catholic Charities
Rabbi Segal, Temple Beth Israel
Laurie Olsen, California Tomorrow
Chanshamone Mekdara, Student
Vimala Nowlis, moderator, California Tomorrow
- 11 a.m. Screening of *American Chinatown* followed by audience discussion led by Dr. Peter Leung, Asian American Studies, UC Davis
- Morning events take place in the Press Room of The Fresno Hilton
- May 14
1:30 “From the Exotic to the Expected: The Chinese in California History,” a lecture by Sandy Lydon, author of *Chinese Gold*, and history professor at Cabrillo College
- 3 p.m. “Songs and Lore of the Mexican Immigrant Experience,” a discussion and performance of early and modern corridos sponsored by Arte Americas and led by Dr. Manuel Peña, anthropology professor at CSU Fresno.
- 4:30 Public Reception
- Afternoon events take place at the Fresno Metropolitan Museum 1555 Van Ness Avenue

Exhibit and Lecture Describe History of Chinese in Central California

As part of the Public Humanities Conference activities in Fresno, the Santa Cruz City Museum is bringing its successful exhibit, "The Chinese in the Monterey Bay Region" to the Fresno Metropolitan Museum. The exhibit, which traveled to four communities in the Monterey Bay Region last year, includes over 150 historic photographs, original documents and maps, as well as costumes, tools, religious objects, and gambling paraphernalia. A video production entitled "Seven Chinese Voices" accompanies the exhibit. The video includes interviews with long-time Chinese residents whose families are featured in the exhibit.

The exhibit opens at the Fresno Metropolitan Museum on Saturday, May 14. In conjunction with this opening, historian Sandy Lydon will give a lecture at 1:30 p.m. on the subject of the Chinese in California. It was Lydon's book, *Chinese Gold: The Chinese in the Monterey Bay Region*, that provided much of the background and inspiration for this exhibit. Lydon teaches history at Cabrillo College in Aptos and spent years tracing the history of the Chinese in the Monterey Bay Region from the arrival of the first fishing people in the early 1850s to the contributions of present-day leaders in the community. Lydon's history depicts their struggle to make America their home despite immigration restrictions and other formidable legal barriers.

In the introduction to *Chinese Gold*, Lydon reflects on some of the reasons that the Chinese contributions to the economic development of the region were overlooked in regional histories:

"The reasons the Chinese received so little recognition in regional histories are embedded in the story of their experience in the United States. In the late 1960s it was fashionable to say that white historians conspired to leave the Chinese out of the general histories, but as with many theories advanced during those tumultuous times, this one is too simplistic. The silence resulted, at least in part, from the ferocious struggle between the Chinese immigrants and all levels of government in the United States. Both the Chinese and white participants wished to obscure this struggle; the Chinese to avoid further harassment by immigration officials, and the whites to cover the often embarrassing facts of the conflict.

Early in my research I was delighted by the subterfuge practiced by nineteenth-century Chinese immigrants in California. I cheered for the Chinese, their crib books (used during interrogations by immigration officials), and their use of aliases to confound government authorities. But when I began to try to follow those Chinese pioneers through the historical records, the sand which they threw in the eyes of their pursuers also obscured my vision.

Many Chinese immigrants bobbed and weaved through their public life using one name in the white community, another in the Chinese community, and another (their true identity) within the immediate family. The historian or genealogist attempting to find specific Chinese individuals in the nineteenth-century records is confronted with a nightmare of aliases and nicknames. In *China Men* Maxine Hong Kingston describes how her father gave a different name to the Stockton police department each time he was arrested for gambling. Stockton police records list dozens of Chinese men arrested for gambling who may have been one person.



Photo from "The Chinese in the Monterey Bay Region" exhibit (courtesy of the Santa Cruz City Museum)

One of the saddest legacies of the Exclusion Law is the inability of many Chinese-Americans to trace their genealogies back more than two or three generations. During its existence (1882–1943) the Exclusion Law destroyed most of the Chinese families it touched, permanently separating members in America from those in China. Even though the law was repealed forty years ago, it continues to work, scrambling the record and keeping Chinese families from learning about their forebears. Third- and fourth-generation Chinese families frequently know as little about their ancestors as do historians and census-takers. In *China Men* Maxine Hong Kingston offered several versions of her grandfather's arrival in the United States—first in a box, then as a regular ship's passenger—demonstrating the state of many Chinese-Americans who have no firm idea how their grandparents came to the United States. For the family-conscious Chinese, this inability to trace their genealogies back beyond 1900 is tragic.

While the nineteenth-century Chinese immigrants diligently obscured their individual identities, white observers of the time often went a step farther and obscured the existence of the entire Chinese community. Individual Chinese may have changed their names, pulled down their hat brims, and moved quietly along the edges of roads, cities, and towns, but groups of them still dotted the region's fields, railroad projects, and beaches. After an initial flurry of curiosity when the Chinese first came to the region in the 1860s, white writers at best took them for granted and treated them like part of the landscape.

Added to the humble nature of the Chinese laborers' work was the wide difference between the culture of English-speaking observers and Chinese immigrants. For most journalists in the Monterey area in the nineteenth century, the Spanish-speaking Mexicans and Californios were foreign enough, and it is no surprise that they found the Chinese to be beyond understanding. After the initial curiosity wore off, journalistic stereotypes for the Chinese became set; most reporters and editors could not get beyond the "heathen Chinee" level of reporting.

Finally, any possibility for cultural exchange and understanding was dashed by the anti-Chinese movement. The derisive and often savage treatment that the Chinese received in the California press in the 1850s was universal. Even when the Chinese did something commendable, it was impossible for any writer to credit them for fear of being branded a 'Chinaman lover.'

The Chinese have been viewed outside the mainstream of the Monterey Bay Region's historical, economic, and social development. By placing them in a more central position, we can gain both a more accurate picture of the region and a new perspective on the experience of 'outside' groups in the region."

CCH Launches Film & Speakers Program

Attention program planners for libraries, museums, community and service organizations in the San Joaquin Valley! If your organization is looking for innovative humanities programs for adult audiences, the new CCH Film & Speakers Directory may be able to help you. The Directory lists eighteen films, produced in part with CCH funds, which are offered to organizations interested in sponsoring film/discussion programs for local adult audiences. The post-screening discussions are led by the filmmakers or by scholars knowledgeable about the issues raised in the film.

Many of the films have been aired nationally on PBS stations and have won film awards in the U.S. and abroad. Some of the films offered include:

Films with an Ethnic Focus

"The Trail North" traces the route of an anthropologist's family from Baja to Alta California.

"The Lemon Grove Incident" is a docu-drama about the first school desegregation incident twenty years before Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954.

"Flyers In Search of a Dream" documents the lives of black aviators during the 1920s.

"Ethnic Notions" examines the damaging black stereotypes perpetuated since pre-Civil War times through the use of images that appeared in films, cartoons, on package labels, and household items.

"Nisei Soldier" is a portrait of young Japanese-Americans who, as members of the 442 Battalion, fought in World War II while their family members were detained in relocation camps.

"American Chinatown" depicts the conflict between local residents of Locke, California and a developer who wants to transform the town into a tourist attraction.

"The Probable Passing of Elk Creek" explores some of the themes of home and community and who owns the rights to claim the land and determine its use.

Films About Women

"Miss... or Myth" documents the differences between the views of the contestants and promoters of the Miss California beauty pageant and the feminists who demonstrate against the objectification of women's bodies.

"Cowgirls" shows the lives of three women who live and work on the range.

continued



Photo from *Lemon Grove Incident*, a film included in the Film & Speakers Directory



Photo from *Code Gray: Ethical Dilemmas in Nursing*, a film included in the Film & Speakers Directory

Film Program continued

Films About Contemporary Issues

“Code Gray” examines many of the ethical dilemmas facing health care professionals in today’s technological world.

“The Day After Trinity” tells the story of J. Robert Oppenheimer, one of the developers of the atomic bomb.

“The Homefront” considers the effects of World War II on those who remained at home from 1941–1945.

“Wilderness Journal,” “Cowhand’s Song,” and “Desert’s Broken Silence” all examine environmental issues.

CCH will make minigrant awards of \$500 to organizations interested in sponsoring a film-and-discussion program. For more information about the films, the funding guidelines, and application procedures, request a free copy of the Film and Speakers Directory from the Los Angeles office: 315 W. Ninth Street, Suite 1103, Los Angeles, CA 90015.

This special minigrant program is part of CCH’s outreach effort to the underserved populations of the San Joaquin Valley. At this time applications for these minigrant funds will be considered *only* from non-profit organizations in the San Joaquin Valley. However, any organization is welcome to request the directory and use the films and speakers listed in it.

The following excerpt from a discussion led by filmmaker Marlon Riggs after the screening of his film “Ethnic Notions” illustrates the type of exchange that is possible in a film-and-speaker program.

“Ethnic Notions” Generates Lively Discussion

About a year ago, filmmaker Marlon Riggs presented his recently released film, “Ethnic Notions,” at a public screening in Wheeler Auditorium on the UCB campus. After the film was shown, a panel of scholars and artists associated with the film responded to questions from the audience. The discussion was lively and covered a broad range of topics. The following excerpts are taken from this exchange with the audience.

MARLON RIGGS: “Ethnic Notions” featured many of the items from the collection of Jan Faulkner. Maybe we can begin the discussion by asking Jan how she got started with this collection.

JAN FAULKNER: The first piece I ever collected was the postcard shown at the beginning of the film of a black man with his mouth open with a few teeth. I was intrigued by it. I had never seen a picture of a black person who looked like that. This collection represents a side of black history that is painful for black and non-black people. It is a side of black history that makes people angry. Many times when I do a lecture or slide presentation, people are angry with me as though I have created these objects and brought them out to harass people. It is a very negative image, and it has not stopped.

AUDIENCE: You are right. It has not stopped. In the last few years, we have witnessed the success of the film, “The Gods Must Be Crazy” in which there are images that include sophisticated coons on one hand and the noble savage on the other hand. The filmmaker says, “It isn’t racist. It’s a very funny film.” And there are many people who participated in the Civil Rights movement who said it wasn’t racist as well. This shows the depth of the problem which was demonstrated so powerfully in “Ethnic Notions.”

PANELIST: The function of a film like “Ethnic Notions” is to remind us what these images were when they were raw, when they were unsophisticated by our terms. Walt Disney’s “Song of the South” has just been re-released and is getting terrific reviews. It is being introduced to a whole new generation of Americans, as a benign, happy film. I think a film like “Ethnic Notions” helps you understand what Disney did in “Song of the South.”

RIGGS: You point out the insidious nature of stereotyping of popular culture. When you deal with racist laws, when you deal with courts and voting rights discrimination, you deal with something that is easily seen as wrong. When you deal with popular culture, you are dealing with something that by definition is supposed to entertain, to make people laugh, to make them feel good in some way. Therefore, when you weave the stereotyping and the racism together with this entertainment aspect, people don’t see the harm. They say, “It was funny.”

AUDIENCE: What is the connection between the democratic ethos in the U.S. and these kinds of racist images?

PANELIST: To establish a democratic ideal in America while excluding blacks meant that blacks had to be defined or considered to be subhuman. If you say all men are created equal as Jefferson did, and then you want to keep blacks in slavery, there is a tendency to have a very negative image of the people who cannot be included in the Republic. They have to be virtually defined out of the human race. There is a tragic kind of connection between democratic ideology and this negative view of blacks, particularly in the pre-Civil War period, but it is not limited to that period.

AUDIENCE: I would like to go back to the issue of blacks responding in a negative way to these images, turning them upside down as though you were deliber-

ately trying to embarrass black people rather than to see what has happened. I think this connects with what was said in the film about how we have been affected psychologically. Instead of looking where the problem is coming from, we fight among ourselves, internalizing those negative images.

PANELIST: That was a major point in the documentary. I think it is one thing to talk about the way whites created these images, and it is another to talk about how we have begun to internalize them ourselves. That is where the damage is. I look at the change in the hair of my students from the 1960s to the 1980s and I ask myself, what does that mean? We have black women straightening their hair again. It has something to do with this internalization about the kinky hair as a negative thing.

“The whole point of the film was to get people to think, not to just take for granted the images around them when they turn on the television or pick up a cereal box. What do these images say about our culture?”

AUDIENCE: I would like to add that the film shows images projected in the popular culture, images which could not be so widespread if the notions were not supported and reinforced by academic, scientific and religious theories throughout time and even today. It is really important that we attack it from all these levels.

RIGGS: I did not create this documentary as the answer or definitive statement about a certain issue. It poses a question as well as trying to answer a few. But my intention in this documentary was to *raise* questions, to make people think for themselves. Many people want you to give them all the answers. They want to feel as if they have learned something and then that tidbit of knowledge can be stored away and they don’t have to do anything about it. For me the excitement of the project was the idea that people, once they saw the film, would apply the same type of analysis that is used on the past situation to what they see today.

AUDIENCE: You have made a very important film because an analysis of stereotypes, and especially as it relates to film, has not been done. When you were researching the documentary, did you come across any imagery that was too negative or painful or embarrassing and you did not include in the film?

RIGGS: I did not exclude things because they were too painful or too ugly. But lots of ugly images are not there partly because of the time limitation and partly because I was not quite sure where they would take an audience. I did not want to lose my audience, and there was a lot of material to include. But sometimes I would stop in the middle of what I was doing and just sit silently for a moment, trying to deal with the rage I felt and trying to understand how anyone could treat a group of people in this way and do it with this kind of absent-minded sense of humor.

AUDIENCE: The nature of this topic is racism, a racism that seems to be all-pervasive in the popular culture. These images are produced by everyday, typical people in this society. What is the source of this kind of thinking? Where do these images come from?

PANELIST: Fifteen years ago I researched a book of black folklore, and that entailed reading what a lot of white folklorists collected and wrote in the late



Soldier son and his mother, from *Nisei Soldier*, a film included in the Film & Speakers Directory

nineteenth century. These white people internalized so deeply the fact that the people they were going to transcribe spoke differently than they did that even when the blacks spoke the word exactly the way white people do, they gave it a different spelling. For example, although the word "was" sounded exactly the same, they transcribed it as w-u-z. I doubt that these people sat down and said, "How am I going to demean this language?" I think there was something in them that said, "I am going to hear something different," and even though they did not hear anything different, it had to be different because blacks do not speak the same way white people do.

I think racism works that way. I think these images work that way. I do not think they are conscious always. I think that is the way people see reality. They see through the image rather than what is actually there.

PANELIST: What you see here is one expression of racism. There are other expressions—behavioral expressions in the form of discrimination; legal expressions in the form of segregation; intellectual expressions in terms of theories of innate black inferiority. This is a part of something very deeply rooted in our culture. This is the visual side of it. This is the side best captured on film. In other words, we want to have a film about racism that conveys the meaning of racism. The film medium is designed to convey the power of these images and to suggest how deeply rooted they have been in our culture. It is that face of racism that you are seeing.

AUDIENCE: At the end of the film there is a collage of contemporary images—black celebrities and characters that we see on television, in films and sports and so forth. Are those images supposed to mean the same to the audience as those of the old minstrels and stereotypes. If so, how are they the same?

RIGGS: My point was not to say that these images are the same. My point was to say that there is a possible lineage. And whatever the relationship, what do these images say about our psyche and our identity and our needs as a culture? The whole point of the film was to get people to think, not to just take for granted the images around them when they turn on the television or pick up a cereal box. What do these images say about our culture? What does it say about me when I laugh at Mr. T? What I hoped to accomplish more than anything with the documentary was for people to ask themselves, "Why do I feel comfortable with this image?" or "Why do I feel uncomfortable with this image?" Most people don't do that enough, and a lot of people don't do it at all. The images do evoke a strong emotional response, but I want people to get beyond their emotional reaction and to think critically, analytically about the images—and the issues surrounding this type of imagery.

NEH Teacher-Scholar Applications Due May 2

The NEH/Reader's Digest Teacher-Scholar Program underwrites an academic year of full-time independent study in literature, history, foreign languages and other humanities disciplines for up to 53 elementary and secondary school teachers annually. Teachers are invited to submit proposals for an academic year of independent scholarly work in the subjects they teach. Each teacher selected will receive a stipend of up to \$27,500. The application deadline is May 2. To request guidelines and application forms please write or call: NEH/Reader's Digest Teacher-Scholar Program; Division of Education Programs, Room 302, NEH, 1100 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20506; (202) 786-0377.

Three California Museum Projects Receive NEH Funds

NEH announced grant awards to three California museums to support the planning and assembling of exhibits, catalogs and public programs. Grant recipients are: University of California, Berkeley, "Columbus's Great Experiment"; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, "The House of Timur: Princely Arts of 15th Century Iran"; Santa Barbara Museum of Art, "Standing in the Tempest: The Hungarian Avant-Garde, 1908-30."

Viewer's Guide Available for American Poetry Series

A viewer's guide to accompany VOICES & VISIONS, the thirteen-part series on modern American poetry currently being aired nationally on PBS, is available from the CCH office. The 75-page booklet includes sketches of each writer's life and career, highlighting the works examined in detail in the programs. The guide also contains a short bibliography for each author. This ambitious series, a project of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and The Annenberg School of Communications, was funded in part by NEH.

In addition to the PBS broadcasts, the series is available on videocassettes as an educational resource for schools, colleges or community groups. To obtain a price list for the programs as well as a free copy of the viewer's guide, contact the San Francisco CCH office (415) 391-1474 or the Annenberg/CPB Collection 1-800-LEARNER.

Proposal-Writing Workshops in San Francisco and Los Angeles

Proposal-writing workshops are scheduled for May 17 and 19 in both CCH offices. The Los Angeles sessions are 10:00 a.m.-12:30 p.m. at 315 West Ninth Street. The San Francisco workshops are 10:00 a.m. to noon at 312 Sutter Street. The workshops are free, but space is limited so please call in advance to register: San Francisco 415/391-1474; Los Angeles 213/623-5993.

California Humanities Association Holds Annual Conference in Los Angeles

The California Humanities Association, in collaboration with CSU, Los Angeles, will hold its annual conference April 22-24 at the Los Angeles Airport Marriott Hotel. Program highlights include "The Golden Mountain: The Chinese Experience," an address by Elizabeth Waldo, ethnomusicologist, composer, and recording artist; "The Trivializing of American Education," a discussion led by Norman Corwin, author, playwright, and filmmaker. A series of workshops will be held on Friday. For information call Alma Kogan (818) 346-7403.

ACLU Sponsors Forum on Discrimination and Constitutional Rights

A symposium on discrimination and racism in California's educational system will be held on Thursday, April 21, from 1-5 p.m. at the College Center of Sacramento City College. The symposium will feature Equal Rights Advocate attorney Shauna Marshall, who litigated the fight against discrimination in the San Francisco Fire Department; a video on affirmative action; and a panel of educators, students and community representatives.

The symposium is sponsored by the Sacramento Valley Chapter of the ACLU as part of a CCH-sponsored project, "Fulfilling the Promise: the U.S. Constitution in California Life." For more details please contact Elaine Elinson, Public Information Director, at (415) 621-2493.

Arab Labor Migration Depicted in Photo Exhibit

The UCLA Museum of Cultural History will present "Sojourners and Settlers: The Yemeni Immigrant Experience," a traveling exhibition of 110 photographs, from May 1 through June 14. The photographs present a portrait of Yemeni laborers in the United States and also village scenes in their native Yemen Arab Republic.

The exhibit, which was originally mounted in 1985 and has been touring the country since then, was produced by UCLA's von Grunebaum Center for Near Eastern Studies and was funded by CCH, the Mobil Corporation and the ARCO Foundation. Five photographers contributed to this visual documentary of the Yemeni migratory experience.

A book edited by the project director, Jonathan Friedlander, accompanies the exhibit. This publication, entitled "Sojourners and Settlers: The Yemeni Immigrant Experience," includes perspectives by eight scholars, the project photographers, and the Yemeni workers themselves, on the issues surrounding the complex process of international labor migration.

Gallery hours at the Museum of Cultural History in Haines Hall are Wednesday through Sunday, noon to 5 p.m. For further information call (213) 825-4631.



Yemeni pruning crew in a young vineyard in winter, San Joaquin Valley. Photo by Ron Kelley from the "Sojourners and Settlers" exhibit.

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NEXT PROPOSAL DEADLINE: July 1, 1988

Proposals for this deadline must conform to the 1988 Program Announcement. Send 10 copies of all proposals (14 copies of media proposals) to the San Francisco office by the due date.

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1988 Public Humanities Conference

**Cultures in Transition:
Immigration in the Central Valley**



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